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AUTHOR DeDecker, Sally
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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses myths about college students with learning disabilities (LD) which may give false hope to students very unlikely to succeed in college but more often place limitations on students who could succeed with some support services, based on the experience of Project Achieve at Southern Illinois University. The "myths" consider characteristics of students with LD, appropriate campus settings for students with LD, and appropriate support services. Specific myths include: (1) learning-disabled students are better off in a vocational school; (2) students who do not meet the university admissions standards of grade point average and standardized test scores have demonstrated they do not belong in college; (3) learning-disabled students cannot succeed on a large college campus with large lecture classes; (4) LD students should not enter college until all deficits have been remediated; (5) all LD college students have experienced such misunderstanding and mistreatment that counseling is a must; (6) all learning-disabled college students are deficient in reading; and (7) Project ACHIEVE only takes the high intelligence quotient students. (DB)

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The College-Bound L.D. Student -- Let's Bury the Myths Forever

Sally De Decker

Having been involved with a successful college support program for the past fifteen years, Sally DeDecker has repeatedly been exposed to a variety of myths regarding the appropriate college - bound L.D. student and the type of support needed by this same student.

Several myths give false hope to students who despite significant support cannot succeed in a college setting. However, most myths place limitations on students who could succeed in college with the assistance of many of the support programs now being offered at a growing number of post-secondary institutions.

Many of the myths are held by parents and professionals whose responsibility it is to advise young people of their personal and professional options. Unless the persons holding these nuturing and counseling positions are better informed, these myths may prevent many L.D. students from attending college and realizing their true potential.

In addition to the commonly held myths about appropriate college students, there also exists many myths about the college programs themselves. Many parents, guidance counselors and college search advisors may 'rule out' certain programs because they don't offer services deemed necessary by those evaluating the program's effectiveness.

Sally will discuss many of these myths and demonstrate the falseness of these beliefs by sharing examples and stories regarding both former and current members of the Achieve Program at Southern Illinois University.

The College - Bound L.D. Students -- who are they?

1. Any student who is diagnosed as learning disabled can make it in a college setting with a comprehensive support program.

This is not true for several reasons: (1) Some of our young people have been diagnosed as learning disabled and actually placed in L.D. resource even though they do not meet the criterion for this diagnosis. As many of us realize, many school systems have used the L.D. label /classroom as a "dumping ground" for many students who are not actually L.D. Many of these students are actually behavior disordered, emotionally disturbed or mildly retarded. At Achieve, we have occasionally been given the difficult task of telling an applicant (for the first time in their lives) that college is not the appropriate place for them. For those students whose primary problem is emotional, adjustment to college life can be impossible. In these instances, their need for academic support is overshadowed by their need for counseling. The student is simply unavailable to learn and must be convinced

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that a college education should be postponed until their more immediate needs can be addressed. This does not refer to those students who simply need some counseling for college adjustment and/or acceptance of their learning disability, but to those who are under the care of a clinical psychologist and/or psychiatrist for more severe adjustment/personality problems. (2) Because the L.D. student often suffers from delayed social/emotional growth as well as academic, they may not be emotionally age-appropriate for college when they graduate from high school. On several ocassions, we have temporarily rejected a student because of immaturity. In some cases, we have suggested a smaller (and therefore less threatening) college environment and in other cases, we have suggested a community college near their home where they can live at home and make a slower transition.. Even though this is not the answer many parents and students want to hear at the time, we have been pleasantly surprised over the years when we have received return phone calls from both parents and students thanking us for our insight into what was best for their children or themselves.

2. If you have a learning disability and get the chance to go to college, you better not pass it up.

Many parents have fought the system and watched their children struggle for so long that they are determined that their child go to college despite the personal goals of that child. Many feel as though their children will never go to school if they don't go immediately following high school graduation. Almost without exception, the students who attend college to please their parents are unsuccessful. Many times they are the brightest applicants with the greatest intellectual potential. However, they lack the personal motivation and desire to attend college at that point in their lives. Whenever we suspect that an applicant lacks the personal desire to attend college, we warn the family of impending failure so they consider all options for their children.

3. Learning disabled students are better off in a vocational school where they can learn via a hands-on method.

This is not necessarily a myth. Some students are better off in a vocational school setting. However, this is because it better suits their educational goals rather than better matches their post-secondary educational potential. College is not the right choice for everyone, but should be an option for those who decide a college education best meets their educational and personal goals.

4. Students who do not meet the university admissions standards of high school GPA (or class rank) and ACT/SAT mimimum score, have demonstrated they do not belong in college.

The standard admissions criteria used by most colleges and universities involve using high school transcripts and scores from college entrance exams. Colleges/universities who require the L.D. student to meet these standards have really missed the point. The very reason the L.D. applicant needs a support program is because they cannot demonstrate their potential using conventional criteria. The ACT/SAT nows permits students with learning diabilities to take the exam with special accomodations (ie, extra time, reader, etc.) Many

of the L.D. students are not going to have the required GPA because of the very nature of their disability. Colleges and universities using this format set up a "Catch 22" situation for its learning disabled applicants. If they had the GPA needed for acceptance, they more than likely would not need the support of a special program. When Dr. Barbara Cordoni first approached university officials at SIUC about 'institutionalizing" the program, much of her appeal came in the form of low ACT and high college GPA comparisons. Since Achieve started before many students where aware of their right for special accomodations on the ACT/SAT, many original members had exceptionally low scores. Many scores were even in single digits. One particular student received a composite score of 4 on his ACT and made the dean's list in his first semester at SIUC with the help of "Project Achieve".

What kind of campus setting is right for the learning disabled student?

1. Learning Disabled students cannot succeed on a large college campus with large lecture classes.

It would be really hard for me to agree with this statement since SIUC is one of those large campuses with some unavoidable lecture courses. Rather than looking at the size of the university as a negative obstacle, one should look at the nature of the support program . For example, at SIU, we provide notetaking services for our members. The main reason we have included this serivce in our program delivery is because of the large lecture format of many General Education courses. Some programs will not include notetaking as a component. This is both understandable and acceptable if those programs are housed in smaller settings where alternative methods (ie, taping and /or professors' notes) are offered. The distractions of a large lecture hall can also impact on a student's performance at exam time. However, programs such as Achieve have accounted for this by allowing the student to take their exams in a quiet environment at the Achieve facilities. Some also worrry over the size of the univeristy because of the secondary challenges (directionality , organization and time management problems) many L.D. students possess. These problems can be successfully addressed. However, one should never assume that our students will (in time) automatically adjust to a large campus. Teaching one how to adjust must be a component of programs housed at larger university campuses. We assign each Program member to a graduate assistant (working for the program) and they assist the students in making the campus manageable. In general, when looking at college programs, make sure the support offered by that program match the challenges of the campus setting.

2. All L.D. programs are alike and if you are L.D., any program will do.

Just as all L.D. students are not alike, neither are the programs that serve their needs. For example, Achieve does not attempt to provide indepth counseling for the majority of its members. We do not formally address life skill development , but instead restrict our membership to those students who are have normal, age-appropriate adjustment problems such as 'messy rooms' rather than the one who needs day to day assistance in personal budget and hygiene matters. If your needs include this component, Achieve would not be a good choice for you. On the other hand, if you want a program where your membership

does not differentiate you from other college students in choice of classes , degree programs or housing assignments, we are a good choice. Don't forget that many schools publicize to have support for the learning disabled student and these programs offer nothing more than an admissions policy regarding the L.D. applicant. They admit the L.D. student, but do nothing more for that student after the admissions process has been completed. Take time to investigate the programs you find interesting and visit each if possible.

3. Learning disabled students should be restricted in their selection of majors.

One of the questions most frequently asked of Achieve staff is in regard to the majors chosen by program members. Some assume that they are restricted in what majors they may choose. Although we would be the first to agree that certain processing problems may limit the student, we never forbid students from giving it a try if they really want it. We usually find that if they are instructed to take a beginning class in a field that interests them (but appears to be 'wrong' based on their disability), they decide for themselves that their original choice should be reconsidered. We never have (or ever will) place boundaries/restrictions on someone's dreams.

What support services are appropriate for the L.D. college student?

1. L.D. students should not enter college until all deficits have been fully remediated.

There are professionals in the field of learning disabilities that believe in complete remediation before college. This is not financially practical for many L.D. students. Intense remediation is costly and only the affulent would be able to pursue a college education if this were true. We also have to be honest with ourselves. Although many deficits can be partially remediated with the appropriate techniques/strategies, some deficits are not completely 'fixable'. Our students may always need a word processor (with spellcheck), a Franklin spelling Ace or a hand calculator. I would hate to be the one to tell Einstein that his theory of relativity was unacceptable because he had mispelled some of the words in his written proof. The question of remediation vs compensatory techniques (in the field of learning disabilities) is as old as the "natute vs nuture" argument. There is no right side to this story and once again, individual needs have to be assessed before deciding on the best approach for your child.

2. Once a student has reached college, remediation is inappropriate.

We, at Achieve look closely at the student's background when attempting to determine if remediation is appropriate or unnecessary. If the applicant has come from a solid background of appropriate and ongoing remediation, there is little purpose in continuing. However, if the applicant has come from a system where remediation was not part of their support, we find that many college students respond well to remediation. Many of our

students (about 1/2 of our new members each year) are placed in a developmental writing course for remediation of their written language skills. This is done sometime in their first year and prior to allowing them enrollment in the college credit composition course. Remediation in math, reading comprehension, organization, time management, etc. are also avaialble for Achieve members.

Some programs require enrollment in a summer program. Several of these programs require that all members be exposed to special remedial reading programs. Since not all members have the same learning disability or processing deficits, we do not feel that it is appropriate to require all new members to attend a remedial program that treats them as acdemic 'clones' of one another.

3. All L.D. college students have experienced such misunderstanding and mistreatment that counseling is a must.

Some L.D. students can definitely benefit from some counseling to better understand their learning disability and the kinds of services they are entitled to because of this diagnosis. Self esteem and self worth are issues that frequently need to be addressed with this population. However, some students have come from very healthy family and educational backgrounds where their disability has not been overly stressed in terms of ego development. Counseling should not be mandatory, but available if needed.

4. Compensatory strategies do nothing more than make the L.D. student rely upon 'crutches'.

Many of the compensatory strategies/techniques used by college programs are nothing more than teaching a student how to draw upon their strengths and 'side step' their weaknesses. Use of a Franklin Spelling Ace is comparable to use of a dictionary by most. Verbal testing is simply education's equivalent to the business world allowing its managers, salespersons, etc. to dictate reports. As Dr. Cordoni has pointed out for many years, "After one leaves school, no one is concerned with their reading level." People who believe these strategies are nothing more than "crutches" must not actually believe in learning disabilities. They would not refuse a blind person assistance with reading/writing. However, those with the 'invisable handicap' are denied or disgraced for asking for the same understanding/accomodations.

5. Any student could do better with extra time on exams.

This myth comes from some of the university professors who insist that it isn't fair for the L.D. student to have extra time. They believe that any student could do better with extended time on their college exams. Results of research conducted at the University of California showed that this is not true. The test scores of L.D. students did improve with extra time. The scores did not improve for students who were non L.D.

Common characteristics of the learning disabled college student

1. All learning disabled college students are deficient in reading.

Not all students in the Achieve Program are deficient in their reading. Quite frequently, their reading skills have adequately developed, but it is their written language skills that remain deficient. Approximately 1/5 of the Achieve members use Books on Tape. Some of these students use them because of their significant strength in listening comprehension and not necessarily because they are unable to read in the conventional way.

2. All college students who are diagnosed as learning disabled are deficient in both verbal and written expression.

When I was doing some research for this report, I was surprised to find this statement in several of the books I read. We do find (and are actually finding more all the time) many of our applicants who have undiagnosed language disabilities. This type of disability affects both their written and spoken language. Their syntax, semantics and vocabulary are greatly affected. However, we also have many members who despite significant written laguage deficits verbally express themselves fluently , using age appropriate vocabulary. In fact, it is their strength for the "gift of gab" that steers many of them into a profession in sales.

3. "I only have a math disability and therefore do not qualify for an academic support program on the college level."

Although there may be some progams who restrict membership to students with language disabities (reading and writing problems), many do not. Students with dyscalculia find that math can be as big of an obstacle as composition is to the language disabled student. Although this student is rare (dyscalculia only), we have had students who meet this profile. Just last week (Feb. 4 and 5) we tested such a young man. His overall IQ was measured at 130, his reading and written language skills were measured well above the 12th/16th grade level, yet his math skills ranged (depending upon test format) between the beginning of the 7th and the 12th grade level. Needless to say, once this young man completes his math requirements at SIU, he will most likely not need continued support .

Myths about the Achieve Program at SIUC

1. If you don't apply before your sophomore year in high school, you might as well forget it.

Achieve now accepts 65 new members each fall semester and as many as 15 new members each Spring semester. Several years ago when our membership was more limited, early

application (freshman, sophomore year of high school) was imperative and it is still recommended for students who know they may be interested in coming to SIUC. However, it is no longer essential that students apply this early. We are usually able to accomodate any student who applies in their Junior year of high school and even some who make application early in their senior year. The growing number of new programs probably accounts for this change.

2. They only take the cream of the crop -- the high IQ kids.

We do not use any IQ cut - offs. Applicants must, of course, have average intellectual potential, but we are generally more interested in the profile of intellectual strengths and weaknesses than in the overall IQ. In fact, we always request that individual scaled scores be sent with the diagnostic information so the applicant's processing strengths and weaknesses can be evaluated.

3. They give preferential consideration to in-state students.

All of our applicants are handled on a first come (applied), first serve (tested) basis. No one is tested until sometime during the year prior to their year of intended program entry.

4. They give preferential consideration to graduating seniors over transfer students.

Ditto to above answer

5. They treat you like a number rather than a person.

I am surprised to have to write this one down. However, just recently I spoke to a father who claimed he did not apply to Achieve because our printed material made us sound like a business rather than a personal support program. Although I don't feel as though this myth is common, I wanted to dismiss it just in case. We know our members, care for them on both a personal and academic level, are their cheerleaders and campus advocates when needed.

If you have any questions regarding this hand-out, please write me, Sally DeDecker at: SIUC Achieve Program, Carbondale, Illinois 62901 or give me a call at (618) 453-6131.

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